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FURTHER PROMOTION AND ENCOURAGEMENT OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND FUNDAMENTAL FREEDOMS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF THE PROGRAMME AND METHODS OF WORK OF THE COMMISSION

Written statement submitted by the Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[18 March 1996]

1. The Baha'i International Community wholeheartedly welcomes the proclamation of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education (hereafter, "the Decade"). We believe that education is indispensable to the realization of human rights. Education which instils in hearts and minds an awareness of and a sensitivity to the human rights of all persons constitutes, in our opinion, an essential tool for the promotion and implementation of international human rights standards.

2. In particular, we welcome the emphasis of the Commission on Human Rights on the importance of a holistic educational approach. In resolution 1995/47, for example, the Commission expressed its conviction that "human rights education, both formal and non-formal, should involve more than the provision of information and should constitute a comprehensive lifelong process by which people at all levels of development and in all strata of society learn respect for the dignity of others and the means and methods of ensuring that respect

in all societies". Moreover, the Commission echoed the inspirational words of article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims that "education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms".

3. The Plan of Action prepared by the High Commissioner for Human Rights (A/49/261-E/1994/110/Add.1, annex) reflects this integrated conception of education by defining human rights education as "training, dissemination and information efforts aimed at the building of a universal culture of human rights through the imparting of knowledge and skills and the moulding of attitudes and which are directed to:

(a) The strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;

(b) The full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity;

(c) The promotion of understanding, tolerance, gender equality and friendship among all nations, indigenous peoples and racial, national, ethnic, religious and linguistic groups;

(d) The enabling of all persons to participate effectively in a free society;

(e) The furtherance of the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace" (para. 2).

4. The Baha'i International Community fully embraces these goals and objectives. Human rights education, if it is to succeed, must seek to transform individual attitudes and behaviour and thereby establish, within every local and national community, a new "culture" of respect for human rights. Only such a change in the fundamental social outlook of every individual - whether a government official or an ordinary citizen - can bring about the universal observance of human rights principles in the daily lives of people. In the final analysis, the human rights of an individual are respected and protected - or violated - by other individuals, even if they are acting in an official capacity. Accordingly, it is essential to touch the hearts, and elevate the behaviour, of all human beings, if, in the words of the Plan of Action, human rights are to be transformed "from the expression of abstract norms" to the "reality" of the "social, economic, cultural and political conditions" experienced by people in their daily lives (para. 6).

5. The Baha'i Teachings have long advocated both moral and intellectual education as essential to enabling human beings to realize their full potential as contributing members of socially and spiritually advancing communities. Baha'Ullah, the Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, proclaimed that "Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess". Baha'Ullah furthermore counselled: "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom." 1/

6. In the Baha'i view, the education required to enrich the human mind and spirit must seek to develop those essentially moral attributes - including truthfulness, courtesy, generosity, compassion, justice, love, and trustworthiness - whose reflection in the everyday lives of human beings can create harmonious, productive families and communities and make the enjoyment of fundamental rights a reality for all their members. Such education, moreover, must help to instil in every individual a keen, emotionally grounded awareness of the fundamental unity of humankind. As people begin to see each other as members of one human family, they will become willing to discard negative learned stereotypes and begin to see people of other ethnic groups, nationalities, classes and religious beliefs as potential friends rather than as threats or enemies.

7. Educational programmes undertaken as part of the Decade must also cultivate a greater understanding that to each right is attached a corresponding responsibility. The right to be recognized as a person before the law, for example, implies the responsibility to obey the law - and to make both the laws and the legal system more just. Likewise, in the socio-economic realm, the right to marry carries with it the responsibility to support the family unit, to educate one's children and to treat all family members with respect. The right to work cannot be divorced from the responsibility to perform one's duties to the best of one's ability. In the broadest sense, the notion of "universal" human rights implies a responsibility to humanity as a whole. This interplay between rights and responsibilities has, for nearly 50 years, been acknowledged in article 29 of the Universal Declaration, and is reaffirmed in the Plan of Action itself. 2/ Human rights education should accordingly focus on developing an awareness of the connection between rights and responsibilities and of the personal responsibility we each have to safeguard the rights of our fellow human beings.

8. In Turning Point for All Nations, a statement issued on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations, the Baha'i International Community called for a universal campaign to promote moral education. Because Baha'is believe that moral education is needed to bring about the "universal culture of human rights" envisioned by the Plan of Action, and because an individual's fundamental moral framework is formed at a very young age, we strongly endorse the Plan of Action's call (para. 25) for beginning human rights-inspired education in early childhood. We encourage Governments and non-governmental organizations, including religious organizations, to consider ways of instilling an awareness of human rights, human unity, and responsibilities towards others in educational programmes for the youngest children. Indeed, because girls will become the mothers and primary educators of the next generation, we also recommend that if educational resources are limited, the girl-child be accorded priority.

9. Finally, the Baha'i Writings affirm that religion is the chief instrument "for the establishment of order in the world and of tranquillity amongst its peoples". 3/ We, therefore, believe that religious organizations have an especially important role to play in providing the type of values-centred education we have described here, and we welcome their explicit inclusion in the Plan of Action.

10. Baha'i communities in 173 countries are already both promoting and providing education based on the principle of the oneness of humanity, which seeks to cultivate respect for the rights of others, a sense of responsibility for the well-being of the human family, and the moral attributes that contribute to a just, harmonious and peaceful world civilization. As a fundamental tenet of their religion, Baha'is are committed to the eradication of all forms of prejudice, including those based on race, ethnic origin, religion, sex or nationality - prejudices that fuel hatred and cause otherwise good people to deprive their fellow citizens of their rights. Baha'is are thereby working to build, in the communities in which they reside, that new culture conducive to the universal enjoyment of human rights that is a primary goal of the Decade. As the United Nations and national focal points in Member States develop curricula for the Decade, the Baha'i International Community would be pleased to offer whatever insights might be useful, based on its century and a half of experience promoting respect for the rights of all people.

Notes

1/ Baha'Ullah, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 269-70 (Shoghi Effendi trans., 1976)

2/ See Plan of Action, para. 21, which recommends that the general public "be the subject of far-reaching human rights information efforts designed to inform them of their rights and responsibilities under the international human rights instruments".

3/ Baha'Ullah, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 63-64 (Habib Taherzadeh trans., 1978).